

# Culture LASH

A booming population of Hasidic Jews—and a proposed rabbinical school—threaten to change Ramapo forever. Here, meet the developers pushing the project...and the people who'd do anything to stop them.

BY ROBERT ZELIGER  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK VERGARI

The mood was tense in the ballroom of the Nanuet Comfort Inn this May. About 75 people had gathered to listen to a group of Hasidic Jewish developers, their lawyers, and paid environmental experts explain why the group's intention to build a rabbinical college in the heart of Pomona was not as devastating as some would make it seem. The audience—mainly Pomona residents—weren't buying it. One resident after another stood to add their voice to the choir opposed to the development, pointing to studies showing an already burdened sewage system, depleted water supplies, and traffic concerns. Pomona is one of Rockland's quietest and most rural nooks, with a population of fewer than 3,000 and homes that sit luxuriously on at least one acre of land. The Tartikoff Rabbinical College, a

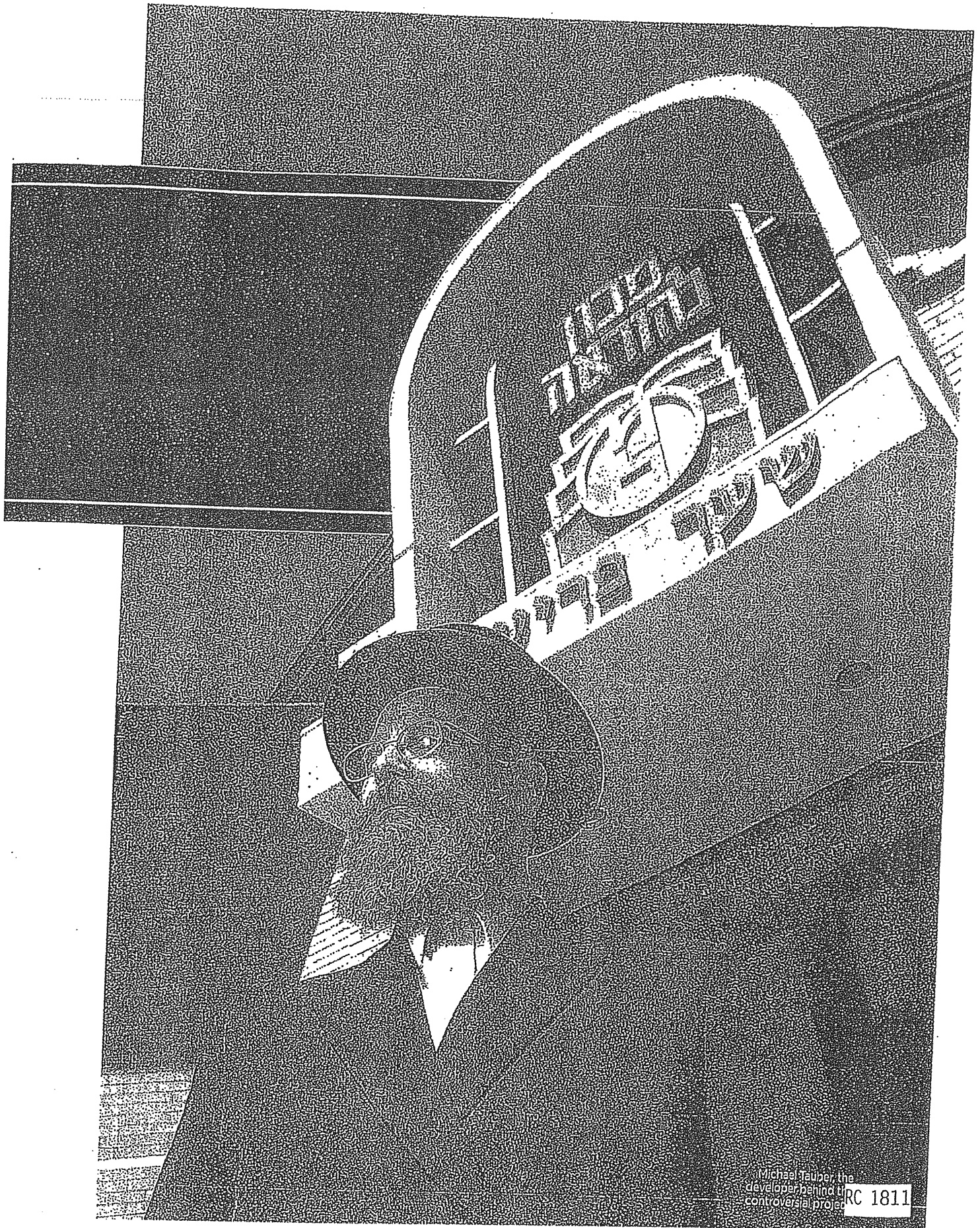
development that has been vexing residents since its plans were announced earlier this year, could add anywhere from 2,000 to upward of 9,000 new residents into a densely packed area, and jeopardize the 40-year-old village politically, socially, and economically.

And that's why residents packed into the meeting hall. Most remained polite. Some, however, could barely control their rage. One white-haired woman shouted, "What right does this group have to come in and destroy this community?" Others began to cheer. Though her lack of decorum might miff some of the leaders of the anti-development cause, who take pains to come across as considerate and practical, she nevertheless summed up the feelings of many (probably most) people here in Pomona—and Ramapo in general.

*What right do they have?*

RC 1810





Michael Tauber, the developer behind the controversial Project 1811



## ROCKLAND'S HASIDIC MAKEUP

Rockland is composed of about 20 different Hasidic sects. Many of them have roots in the group that settled in New Square and Monsey. In the 1990s, many of the 100 families that moved to Rockland came from the Monsey area. The group is made up of about 300 families, and the sects are led by a leader (or a family) and are not more than 100 years old.

She was quick to add, "And I'm Jewish."

And then there's that.

Development disputes are often messy, especially in quiet suburban communities. But add into the mix the whiff of political, religious, and financial intrigue, and the Tartikov College project becomes one of the messiest and most complicated real-estate stories in the region.

"Tension is common between Hasidic groups and their neighbors," says Samuel Heilman, a professor at Queens College who has studied the Hasidic community extensively. "They grow and their areas become more and more densely populated and takes on a character that isn't common to the suburban lifestyle." They don't care about maintaining pretty lawns, for example. "You don't meet them in the grocery store or at the PTA or at the health club or bowling alley. So they are separate and feel different and menacing. You get the feeling that they are ignoring you, so you see a hostility on their part."

In recent years, Rockland's Hasidic Jewish population has exploded, and the group is in desperate need of new housing. For years, Hasidic residents lived in pockets like New Square, Kaiser, and parts of Monsey. Today, given the demands for housing, developers have been forced to expand outward, grabbing up land in places they haven't traditionally been before—Airmont, Pomona, even Sloatsburg.

"There's viral development happening here," says Michael Castelluccio, one of the founders of Preserve Ramapo, an outspoken community group opposed to the developments. *Viral* in that it's multiplying and expanding throughout the county.

"You drive through Monsey now and it's a slum," he says. Which is why Castelluccio and his allies want to keep the Tartikov College out of Pomona.

After all, *what right do they have?*

### NEW SQUARE 2?

The story of Tartikov College actually begins a long time ago, right around World War II. Back then, Spring Valley was home to Jews from New York City who summured at a number of well-known resorts. After the war, as big resorts in the Catskills and elsewhere lured newly middle-class Jews away, the hotels were abandoned. That's where a number

of Hasidic groups first settled, according to county historian William Casey. Before the Tappan Zee was built, Casey says, Rockland was underpopulated and the groups settled here without major conflict—though not without turning a few heads.

An article in *Time* magazine back on March 3, 1961, titled "The Mystics in the Suburbs," recounts the story of a group of Hasidic Jews who relocated from Brooklyn to a tiny corner of Ramapo known as New Square. The article notes, the group's unusual appearance—long beards, heavy black hats, and black coats down to their knees—stood out in the tranquil suburban environment. It ended with a bit of wishful thinking on the part of Ramapo's then-town attorney, David Moses: "I wish they'd go back to Brooklyn."

Of course, they didn't. Today New Square is a densely packed haven where Hasidic residents live largely by their own customs and laws. It has also become somewhat of an unofficial rallying cry for residents opposed to new developments. "We don't want another New Square" is a common refrain.



Rockland offers an existing Jewish infrastructure for schools like Mechon L'Hoyroa Yeshiva, below.

After all, New Square started with the purchase of a 130-acre farm. The Pomona project will consist of 100 acres...and there is a second project being planned for adult-student housing, on 200 acres, at Patrick Farm, next door to the Tartikov College.

While the notion that such an insular group will overrun Rockland doesn't carry a lot of legal or political weight, it's hard not to notice that the group is growing at an extremely rapid rate. These days, you can barely drive through Ramapo without seeing a new construction project for the Hasidic community. The average household for a family in New Square is 5.8 compared with the average household size for the general population, which is 3.1; and Dr. Mitchell Schwartz, the superintendent of the East Ramapo school district, says that the private-school enrollment in his district increases each year by 3 to 4 percent—a hike caused largely by Hasidic yeshiva growth.

Since there is no Census data on religious groups—and since Hasidic leaders feel it's not in their best interest to release numbers about their community—it's hard to determine the exact size of Rockland's Hasidic population. However, roughly speaking, according to multiple sources in the community and experts who study the group, there are about 8,000 Hasidic families in the county. "But if you ask tomorrow there will be 8,010," jokes one rabbi. The reason for their prolific growth is hardly a mystery. Most groups came from Eastern Europe in the middle of the century, after they were nearly annihilated in the Holocaust. As a result, they possess an ingrained notion of procreation for survival. Additionally, for religious reasons, they do not use birth control.

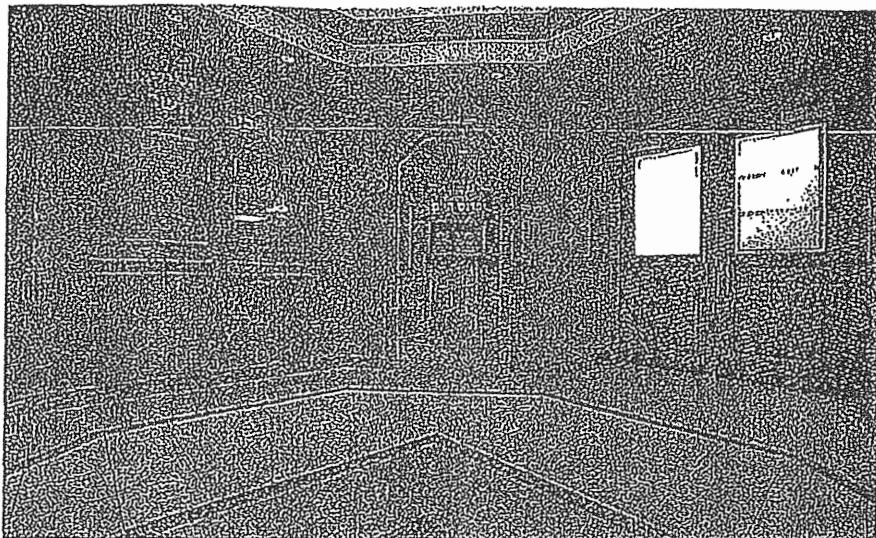
### BACK TO SCHOOL

The main study room at Mechon L'Hoyroa Yeshiva is buzzing with activity on a recent Wednesday evening. About 70 men—and only men can study here—are poring over books and talking across tables. This, according to the school's owner, is what the Tartikov School will look like—albeit on a much more massive scale.

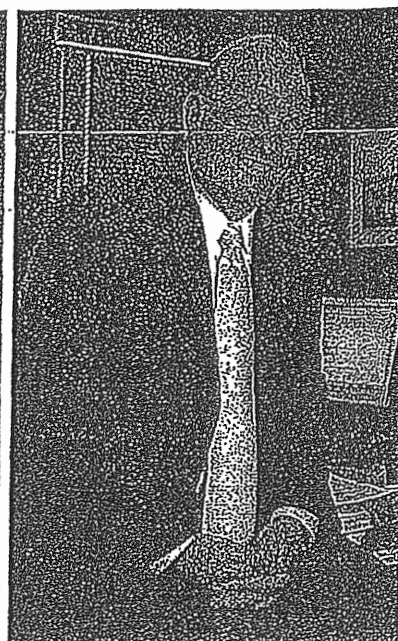
This Spring Valley yeshiva is one of only a few *beis din*s (schools that educate Jewish religious judges) in the country and students here study for 15 years in order to sit on religious courts. According to religious mandate, Jews are supposed to settle civil disputes in Jewish courts rather than secular ones, and today there are only about two dozen judges in the country that can handle such cases. In other words, the need for more judges is acute.

In the Spring Valley facility, every parking spot is taken, and the rooms are full of students. "As you can see, we're bursting at the seams here," says Michael Tauber, the developer bRC 1812 this school and the proposed Tartikov project.





ABOVE The entrance of a Spring Valley yeshiva.  
RIGHT Paul Savad says he's given up other cases to work on the Tartikov Project.



Tauber, 45, is soft-spoken and friendly. He certainly doesn't seem like anyone's idea of a greedy developer. His father established the Spring Valley yeshiva in 1976 (it's the only one of its kind outside New York City), and the younger Tauber is responsible for dozens of Hasidic and non-Hasidic projects throughout the tristate area. The Tartikov School is a passion project, he says. He has a long gray beard and a somewhat round belly and wears a long dark blue jacket down to his knees, as well as a heavy black hat. However, in contrast to his traditional clothes, his cell phone is constantly ringing and he checks his schedule on his black PalmPilot.

The Pomona school will have 250 students to begin with (but that number could rise to 1,000 at some point in the future). Additionally, the Pomona facility will offer three- or four-bedroom housing units for students, their wives, and "as many children as they have."

The 100-odd students at the Spring Valley yeshiva often study from 5 a.m. until 11 p.m. If that sounds excessive, Tauber says, it's a discipline that begins at a young age in the Hasidic community. From age 9, kids are in school from 8 a.m. until 10 p.m. "It's not child abuse," he says with a laugh. "They love it."

While it seems like a simple enough equation—there aren't enough judges, additional schools are needed to train more—there are people who say the whole project sounds illogical. "How many judges graduate from Yeshiva University each year? Maybe five. In Israel, they just had a whole big deal about appointing 12 more [religious] judges. You think we need 1,000 judges in Monsey?" says one Orthodox Hasidic rabbi in Rockland who thinks

the need for hundreds of students at the facility has been overstated. "What are they going to do all day?" The rabbi says there are only a handful of yeshivas as big as the proposed Pomona site, and he says the developers are using this as "a front" to cram in more Hasidic housing in Rockland. He suspects many "students" will wind up working.

Paul Savad, the project's lawyer, vehemently denies this and calls the fight a civil-rights issue. "I understand the reaction of not wanting to have someone different live next door. But if you don't like it sell your house and move. Under U.S. law there is freedom of religion and that protects us here."

It's that kind of statement that has earned Savad criticism from unlikely sources. Dennis Lynch, a lawyer in Nyack who represents dozens of Hasidic groups (and has himself been attacked by anti-development activists), takes issue with Savad's approach. "If you come into a community and say I'm going to come in with 1,000 units and I don't care what your zoning laws say, you invite angry responses. You don't go into a situation with a *fait accompli*."

As to whether or not the project—even if it's a school—will transform the area into another New Square, Tauber answers carefully. "It will be dense," he concedes. "If they're afraid, I understand that."

#### PRESERVING RAMAPO

"This place was beautiful," says Michael Castelluccio, a lifelong Rockland resident and a leader of Preserve Ramapo. He's driving down Maple Avenue, in Spring Valley, where his childhood home still stands. "This block was full of maple trees when I was a kid," he says, almost wistfully. A passionate man

with gray hair down to his shoulders and a closely trimmed white beard, Castelluccio was born in the early '40s. He remembers the community being like the town in the nostalgic film of '50s Americana, *A Christmas Story*. "It had a small-town feel."

His former home now looks to be somewhat in disrepair. The paint is peeling and there is trash on the yard. He says a Hasidic man currently owns it and rents it out. Across the street, there used to be apple trees and a vast field. Today, there are several multifamily homes where more Hasidic families live. "Everything's been paved over, it's all multifamily homes now."

A former schoolteacher, Castelluccio now writes about technology for a business magazine in New Jersey. He has the patience to analyze complex scientific information surrounding development projects (not everyone can comb through endless lists of data about sewage). But then he's a man on a mission. It was about two and a half years ago when Castelluccio first realized what was happening to his county. He was at a town meeting with his wife. The supervisor, Christopher St. Lawrence, was going over the master plan for the town's future, which called for a number of "down-zoning" measures—the process of turning single-family homes into multifamily units—so as many as 30 to 40 people may occupy a lot of land that once housed three or four people.

"It suddenly dawned on us that the guy just sold all of Monsey to religious developers."

St. Lawrence, who never returned repeatedly to his office, is a common villain for anti-



# "Yes we are different, but we can be good neighbors."

—Michael Tauber

development activists here. He's seen as politically indebted to Hasidic groups who wield major political influence given their tendency to vote in blocs.

A few streets away from his former home, Castelluccio passes a street corner that seems to have been turned into a makeshift dump. Garbage is piled up. "This is part of the problem," he says.

Later in the day, Castelluccio and other members of his group tour Patrick Farm, an inspiring piece of property—200 acres of pristine, secluded wooded landscape with trails, streams, and

in the county is poisonous. Rockland is a "no-man's-land," he says, where it's still 1940 in terms of attitudes toward Hasidic groups. "Whatever we do, they attack us," he says, referring to no one in particular.

He's tried to reach out to the outside community, but *reaching out* has become fruitless. "What's the point of talking to people who are set in their outlooks? They're not interested in listening."

Castelluccio and others feel the same way. They've presented their concerns about sewage leaks, traffic increases, and water shortages and

from the Tartikov developers. According to its code, Pomona only considers educational institutions that are "accredited by the New York State Education Department or similar recognized accrediting agency." The Tartikov school is not accredited. The school's lawyer, Paul Savad, had asked for an exemption, arguing federal law allows municipalities to make such changes for religious institutions. The village rejected his argument.

Two days later, Savad filed a federal lawsuit against the village, claiming his clients' civil rights had been violated. Both sides now, it seems, are gearing up for a protracted fight.

Despite all this, Tauber thinks his neighbors will come around. "They'll realize it's going to be a nice, well-designed project. And—slowly—they'll realize: What's the sense of fighting?"

His response is at the very least overly hopeful. Barring divine intervention, it seems most people in Ramapo have already made up their minds—the time for convincing is over...Tartikov must go. Now, it's up to the courts to decide.

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ponds—that is currently slated to be turned into hundreds of units of adult-student housing. It's a quiet weekend afternoon and the tour's guide is Jim Barnard, who lives nearby and is the former commander of the Rockland County Sheriff's Mounted Patrol. Barnard knows the property well and when we reach the main lake, he points out, "We used to go fishing here." Now, he says, it's "dying." Barnard and the members of Preserve Ramapo allege the developers are draining the water illegally in order to allow more houses to be built on the land. They point to rocks that have been moved to allow the water to flow away.

Abraham Moscovits, one of the property's developers, declined to comment on his plans for the property or on the group's allegations. However, in a brief discussion, he says the atmosphere

have been accused of singling out Hasidic developments—and even of anti-Semitism. He says, "This isn't a religion we're talking about. When it gets this large, it's a business."

## LIVING TOGETHER

A few days after the meeting in Nanuet with the Tartikov developers and Pomona residents, Tauber takes some time to reflect. He concedes he was bothered by the angry responses, but not surprised.

"It's typical," he says. "They don't like us and they don't want us here...My hope is, down the road, when we have more information and more studies, that we will start convincing residents that it's not so bad and they shouldn't be afraid we're taking over."

That's not likely to happen anytime soon. In July, the village declined to accept a formal application

## HASIDISM, A PRIMER

There are about 200,000 Jews in the country who can be categorized as Hasidic (most live in Brooklyn). Here's what distinguishes them.

**DRESS** The Jew is modest. Men wear black robes and black hats. Women wear full-length dresses and wigs.

**RELIGION** It's a form of Orthodox Judaism, but not all Orthodox Jews are Hasidic. Hasidic groups are clustered around a leader, who interprets Jewish law and his followers usually obey him. They are the most orthodox of the Jewish community.

**COMMUNITY** Many of the Jews spend their lives studying Torah. They are not allowed to work in secular jobs. Some have become very successful in various industries, especially in real estate. Some have become wealthy. Some have become famous. They don't ever leave their community. They don't ever leave their community. They don't ever leave their community.

**ORIGINS** The groups almost all come from Eastern Europe. The name "Hasid" is derived from the Hebrew word "hasid," which means "pious" or "devoted."

**SEPARATION** The groups are very separate from the rest of the Jewish community. They have their own schools, their own synagogues, and their own leaders. They are very close-knit and very loyal to their community.

RC 1814